

### Religion, space and social status: monastery founders in the Curvature Carpathians, Romania

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# RELIGION, SPACE AND SOCIAL STATUS. MONASTERY FOUNDERS IN THE CURVATURE CARPATHIANS, ROMANIA

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## **Religion, space and social status. Monastery founders in the Curvature Carpathians, Romania**

**Cezar Buterez**

**Religie, spațiu și statut social. Ctitorii de mănăstiri de la Curbura Carpaților, România.** Regiunea Carpaților de Curbură a reprezentat unul din cele mai mari trei centre monahale din statele românești medievale și totodată singurul care a fost concentrat în jurul unui vast complex de biserici rupestre. Studiile privitoare la o posibilă origine paleocreștină precum și istoriile individuale au constituit baza cercetărilor științifice cu privire la mănăstiri, în timp ce studiile de ansamblu au evitat examinarea problemei ctitorilor. Cu toate acestea, actul de ctitorire purta o semnificație simbolică, iar statutul de ctitor avea o importanță aparte, atât din punct de vedere social, cât și spiritual. Bazându-se pe o abordare istorico-geografică, această lucrare va încerca să analizeze distribuția spațială a mănăstirilor în funcție de statutul social al ctitorilor acestora și să ofere o interpretare a modului în care acest statut social, precum și tradițiile religioase au contribuit la apariția și dezvoltarea mănăstirilor și a vieții monahale. Cuvinte cheie: împădurire, GIS, Model Builder, Buzău, scurgere de suprafață.

**Cuvinte cheie:** istoria monahismului, geografie istorică, GIS, Carpații de Curbură, România

**Religion, space and social status. Monastery founders in the Curvature Carpathians, Romania.** The area of the Curvature Carpathians was one of the three largest monastic centres in the mediaeval Romanian countries, and the only one which had concentrated around a previous vast network of rock-hewn churches. The themes of an early Christian origin and that of individual histories have been central to the scholarly investigation of the monasteries, while overview studies generally avoided exploring them in relation to their founders. Yet, the act of founding bore a symbolic meaning and one's capacity as founder was something of great importance, both social and spiritually. Drawing on a historical-geographical approach, this paper will try to analyse the spatial distribution of the monasteries according to their founders' social status and offer an interpretation of how this social status and religious traditions have contributed to the emergence and growth of the monasteries and monastic life.

**Keywords:** history of monasticism, historical geography, GIS, Curvature Carpathians, Romania.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Monasticism has always been a vital part of the Orthodox Christian faith. It is considered to be based on the words of Christ who was asked by a young man: "What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" He answered: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me" (Mt. 19:16, 21) [1]. Thus monasticism is not an obligation for all people; it is a burden only for those who willingly take it in pursuit of spiritual accomplishment. Beginning in Egypt, with saints such as St. Anthony the Great and St. Paul the Anchorite, it continuously spread to Rome, Constantinople, and Cappadocia, and ultimately it arrived and became a central aspect of life in Eastern Europe [2] .

The beginnings of Romanian monasticism are considered to be as old as Christianity itself, the teachings of Jesus Christ being propagated to Dobrudja, according to tradition, by Saint Andrew the Apostle [3]. Most of the citadels and places of worship of Dobrudja were destroyed by Slavs in the eight century, some theologians arguing that the monks took refuge in the Buzău Mountains (part of the Curvature Carpathians), where they gave rise to one of the largest monastic centres in the Carpathians [4]. This theory revolves around the existence in the Buzău Mountains of a complex of rock-hewn vestiges similar to that of Ivanovo in Bulgaria [5], first studied by the renowned Romanian archaeologist Alexandru Odobescu in 1871 [6]. Most researchers see these remains as the clearest expression of early Christianity and anchoritic monasticism at the Carpathian Curvature [4], though we still lack any piece of documentary or archaeological evidence in support to this statement. According to other opinions based on the scarce information found in mediaeval documents, the monasticism of the Curvature Carpathians would be of later origin, possibly linking with the activity of Saint Theodosius at Kelifarevo, Bulgaria, and its promotion of hesychasm in the fourteenth century, beyond the river Danube [7] [8]. Indeed, hesychasm was practiced by hermit monks in the Buzău region, but, like their counterparts from the Orthodox world, details about their solitary lives went almost unrecorded in history [9]. Some clues about the anchoritic past may lie in the patron saints (in Romanian 'hramuri') of the oldest sketes, all of them considered to be of hesychast origin [7]. Other clues can be found in the oldest historical document kept, which only mentions the transition from the anchoritic to the coenobitic way of life, which dates to the second half of the sixteenth century [10]. Of the three sketes mentioned in the document, at least one of them, Agaton, had a rock-hewn church, the second, Motnău, had a wooden church, and the third, Bogoslovul, still remains unidentified, although most researchers believe that it had a rock-hewn church too [11] [12] [10]. Even after the establishment of the coenobiums, hermit monks continued to exist, and all forms of monasticism flourished in the seventeenth century to such an extent that the Buzău region became famous for its monasteries and sketes, and

the Steward Constantin Cantacuzino recorded this on his Map of Walachia from 1700, as “Schiturile monahilor” (The hermitages of the monks, [13]). Despite the slight overall downfall of monasticism in the eighteenth century caused by the harsh politics of the Phanariote Princes and the never-ending conflicts with local peasants and boyars, the monks started yearning about hesychasm and some decided to retreat again to more remote areas. The rock-hewn churches and cells were once again used, as seen from their abundance of mediaeval inscriptions [14]. It becomes no wonder that the foundations of the southern Curvature Carpathians have sparked the interest of researchers.

Individual studies have been made to almost all of the important monasteries [15] [12] [16] [17], and several overview studies tried to build a historical database of the places of worship from Buzău region [18] [19] [10]. The paradox is that although all of these studies have dealt with the issue of the monastery founders, only one author attempted to study the relationship between the founder and its foundation for more than just one monastery [10]. In this paper we aim to continue and expand this approach, by exploring the monasticism of Buzău region not only from a historical point of view, but also from a geographical one, integrating information about both the social status of the founders, church patrons and local characteristics of the monastic life as revealed from historical documents and other primary unused sources..

## **2. STUDY AREA**

The study area is located in the external Curvature of the Romanian Carpathians, comprising both the extreme south of the Eastern Carpathians (Ivănețu Massif) and the extended hilly lands situated south-east, which geographers have called the Buzău Sub-Carpathians [20] (figure 1). This region, ranging from Teleajen river valley in the west, and Râmnicu Sărat river valley in the east, stands out because it has been crossed only by a single great commercial road in the Middle Ages [21]. The rest of it, especially the north and north-eastern parts were relatively isolated, and are suspected to have been part of a mediaeval micro-state run by an association of village communities [22].

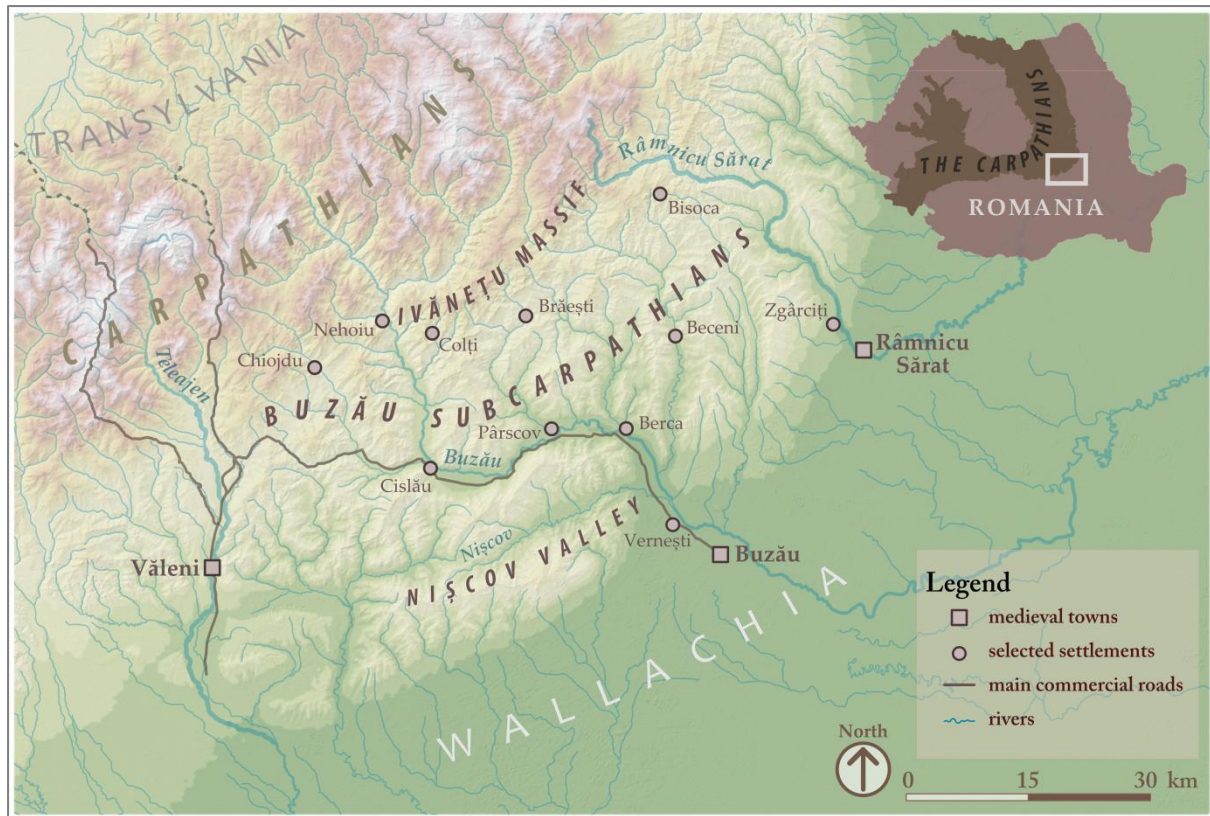


Figure 1. The study area

### 3. METHODS

The main instrument used was the compilation of all the monastic establishments that existed throughout the study area from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. For this arduous operation we have used a large number of historical documents from the National State Archives, the Romanian Academy Library, the Buzău Diocese, and private collections, part of them being already published in the *Documente privind Istoria României* and the *Documenta Romaniae Historica* collections, or by other researchers. All of these were coupled with the results from numerous field campaigns, conducted systematically over the years 2008 – 2015. The final table contained one hundred and ten monasteries and sketes attested in the historical documents at least once. For each of them, we gathered basic information about its oldest name, year of founding or attestation, age, founder, and patron saint (see Table 1).



Table 1. Information collected for each monastery and skete

Attribute	GIS type	Description
name	string	It contains the official name of the monastery as recorded in historical documents; if more than one name appears, the most accurate name is considered to be the oldest one attested.
year of founding or attestation	string	It contains the year in which the monastery was founded, according to historical documents or church inscriptions (' <i>pisanie</i> '); for the places of worship with no information about the date of founding, we introduced the year of their first attestation.
age	short	It contains the century in which the monastery was founded or was first attested.
location	string	Brief information about the location of the monastery as against settlements and main rivers.
founder	string	The social status of the monastery's founder; where no reliable information is available, the field is marked <i>unknown</i> .
patron saint	string	The patron saint of the monastery, according to historical documents or church inscriptions (' <i>pisanie</i> '); where no reliable information is available, the field is marked <i>unknown</i> .
current status	short	A code from 0 to 5, representing the current status of the monastery, from disappeared and identified (0) to functional (5)

Locating them on the field was the next step. Most of them were identified using the Romanian Topographical Maps known as the Army Shooting Plans (scale 1:20.000), which were published and updated between 1916 and 1959, and considered to be the best in respect to local toponymy [23]. Other places of worship were located using the results of archaeological excavations which uncovered building ruins that could be identified, based on the material found, with monastery and skete churches [24] [25] [26]. Finally, with the help of micro-toponymy and collective memory, some establishments were identified on the field, and their position recorded using a Garmin GPSMAP 60CSx GPS receiver. From the total of one hundred monasteries and sketes, only forty-eight were surely identified. Because of insufficient information, the remaining fifty-two could not be precisely located, and therefore cannot be fully used in this study.

All localized monasteries and sketes along with their basic information were included as SHP vector files in a Geographical Information System (GIS) database, using the Romanian National Stereografic 1970 projection system.

Data from the GPS was transferred to a PC using MapSource 6.15.11 software in GPX format, which was then converted into SHP (shapefile) and reprojected to

Stereografic 1970. Data processing was conducted using ESRI ArcGIS 10 and QGIS 2.6.0 Brighton. Further cartographic work was done using Inkscape 0.48.5.

Finally, for all of the eighty-nine monasteries and sketes, we added an attribute which describes their current status, complementary to the location. The establishments we consider as disappeared cease, at a given time, to be mentioned by historical documents or cartographic materials. On the other hand, some of them are explicitly documented as having been dissolved by the Bishop, although the exact reasons for this are unknown. In some cases, even though the monastery or skete disappeared or was dissolved, its church continued to be used for a village parish, or, when it was severely damaged, a new church was constructed on another site for the same reason [4].

## 4. RESULTS

### The age of the monasteries and sketes

Discussing the temporal point of view, we can refer to all one hundred and fourteen monasteries and sketes that we could find, even if not located, since only three of them are of unknown age. Yet, there is an important weakness of our approach, since if a monastery is attested in the fifteenth century, it doesn't necessarily mean that it was established in that century.

What we can immediately assert is that the number of monasteries attested increased progressively in each century up to the seventeenth, where there is the maximum (thirty-six). After this moment, during the eighteenth century, their number slightly decreased, for it to fall heavily during the nineteenth century (figure 2).

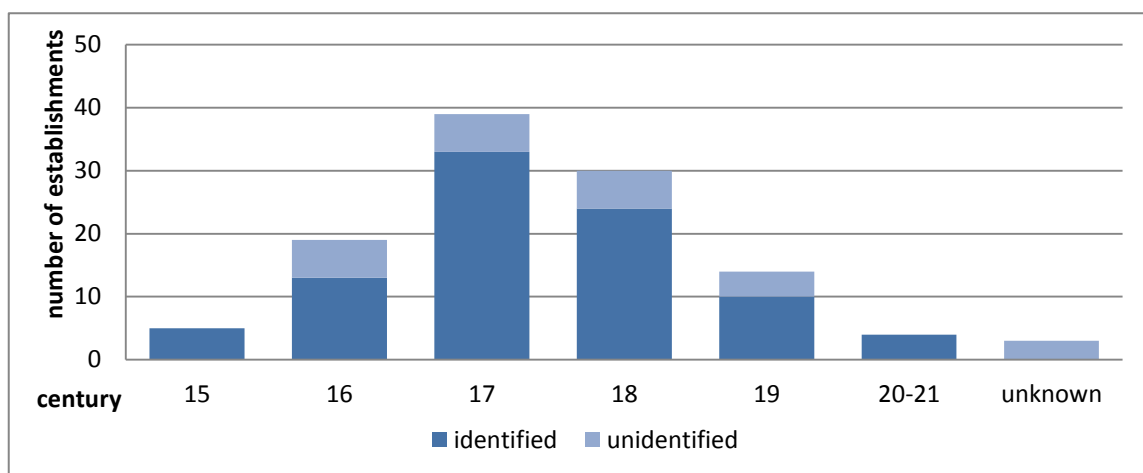


Figure 2. Graphic of the relative age of all one hundred and fourteen monasteries and sketes

Many of the monasteries received estates, new churches and other favours from the Wallachian princes or other benefactors [19]. Also, a new trend appeared during the seventeenth century: that of small sketes and hermitages founded by simple villagers,



although their existence was usually quite short. Only the richest and most active of them survived through the eighteenth century. The nineteenth century was crushing for Romanian monasticism because of the Secularization of monastery estates proposed by the prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza and approved by the Romanian Parliament in 1863 [27]. Only a few monasteries survive, and we think that apart from Nifon and Cetățuia, the remaining seven must have been founded at least a century earlier, since the political and economic situation of Wallachia (Romanian Principalities after 1859) was unstable.

To obtain an expressive view of how the age of the monasteries varies across space, we interpolated the age attribute of the eighty-nine entries using the Topo to Raster function of the 3D Analyst extension in Esri ArcMap 10 software package. The result was a 300 m spatial resolution raster which in fact represents a digital age model of the monasteries.

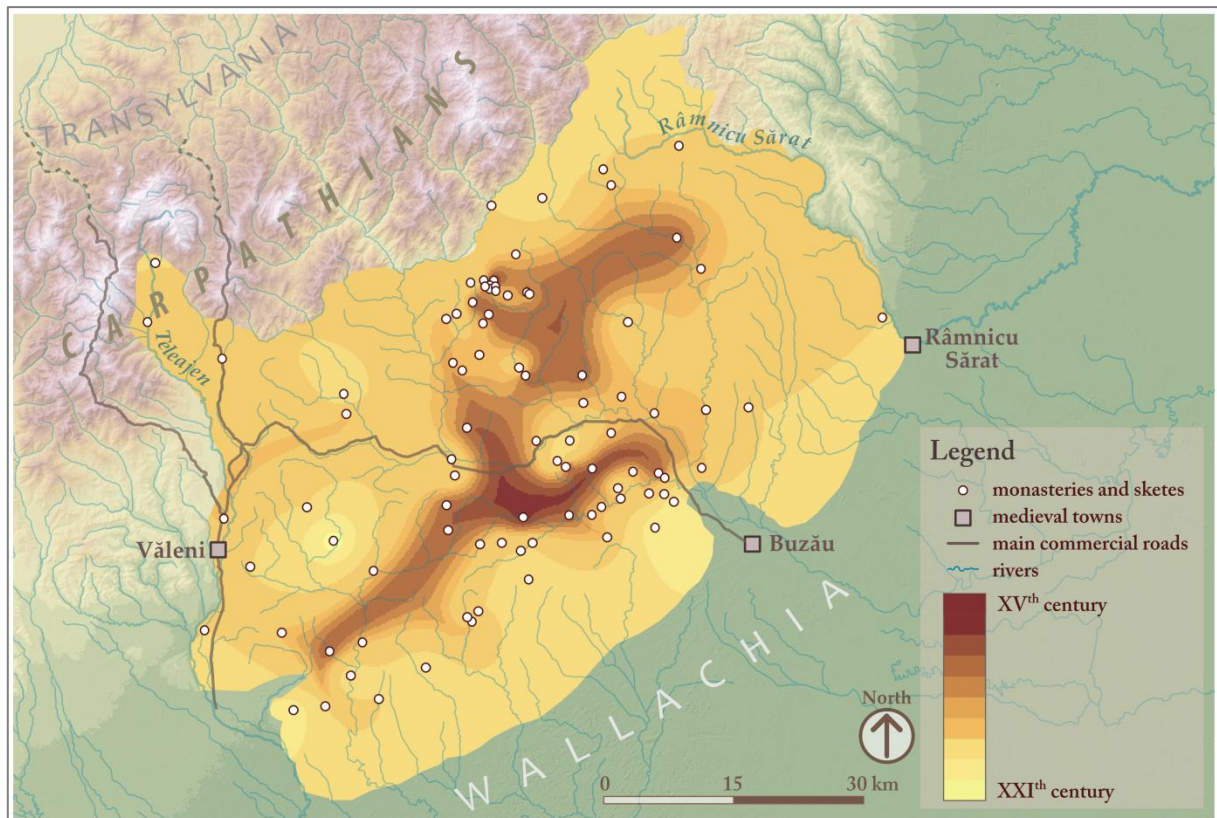


Figure 3. Map of the relative age of monastic settlements

The map reveals some extremely important issues (figure 3). We can distinguish two areas of old age. The first is located on the Nișcov valley, and it appears as a linear group on the ranging from west to east, continuing with newer establishments towards the north-west of Buzău. The second core is in the north, in the Ivănețu Massif. Unlike that of Nișcov valley, this one is more homogeneous in terms of both space and time. Not coincidentally, it overlaps almost perfectly over the area of the rock-hewn vestiges. Both of these cores have developed far from trade routes, through hidden valleys, to which

the roads, even in the nineteenth century, were still considered inaccessible and dangerous [28]. As we approach the main valleys and trade routes, the monasteries and sketes become newer.

### The current status of the monasteries and sketes

We have already discussed about the two old centers of monasticism in the Buzău region, and about how it developed during the Middle Ages. Yet, if we look at today's monastic life, the picture is totally different. From the eighty-nine known monasteries and sketes, only eighteen are still in function in 2015 (figure 4). Most of them have disappeared (nineteen), or have been abolished (three), although in some cases, the church is still used as a village parish.

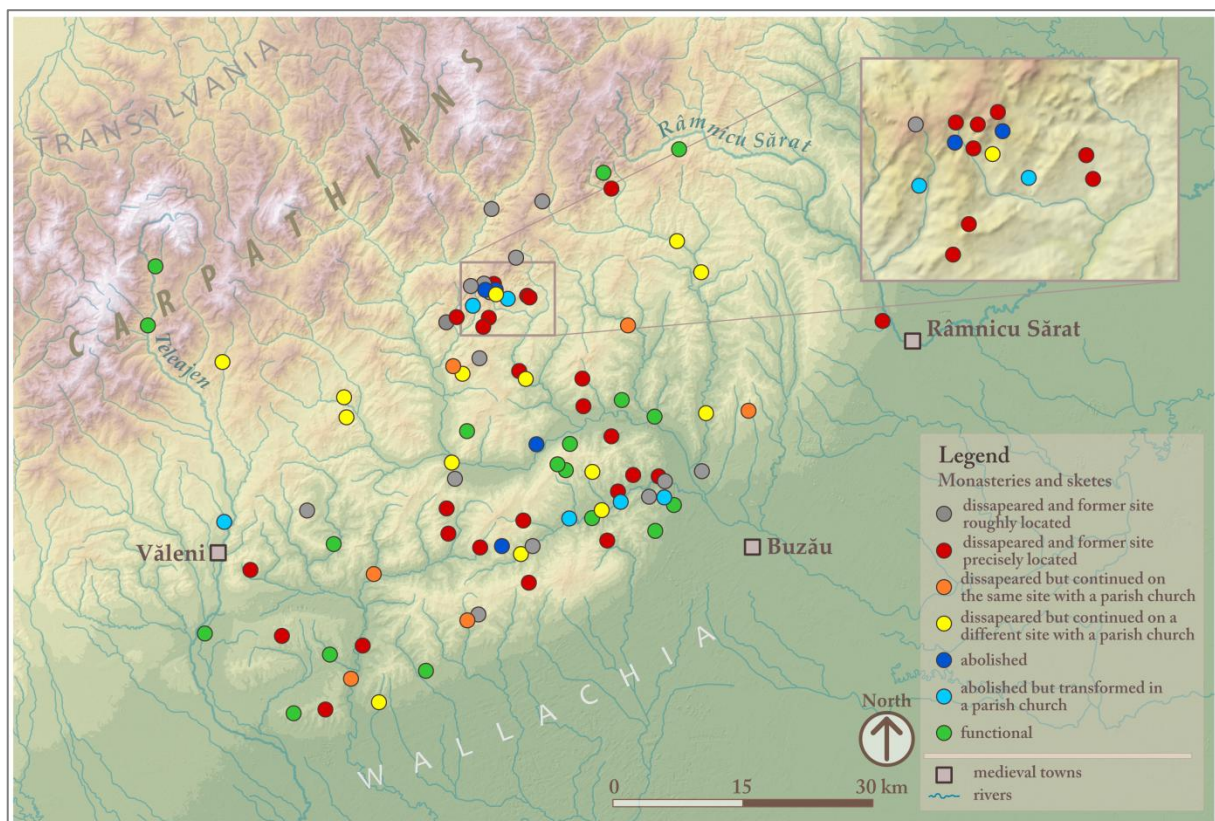


Figure 4. Map of the current status of the monastic settlements

If we take a look at the distribution of the disappeared monasteries and sketes, we can notice that again we have two core areas, which not surprisingly overlap almost perfectly over the oldest monastic centers, Nișcov valley and Ivănețu Massif (figure 5). It may be a clue that sometime in the past, the practice of monasticism undertook a major change. The hesychasm loving hermits which found shelter in the rock-hewn cells of the Ivănețu Massif were no longer a model of mediaeval monasticism. Apart from the overall changes in the society, more and more laymen of different ranks interfered in their lives and forced them to come out in the world, or to retreat even further. The spread of



coenobitic life meant less predisposition to hesychasm. However, as the map points, the age of hermits didn't end until the eighteenth century, when the Wallachian throne was taken over by Phanariote princes and the country was caught in the middle of the wars between Russia, Austria and the Ottoman Empire [29].

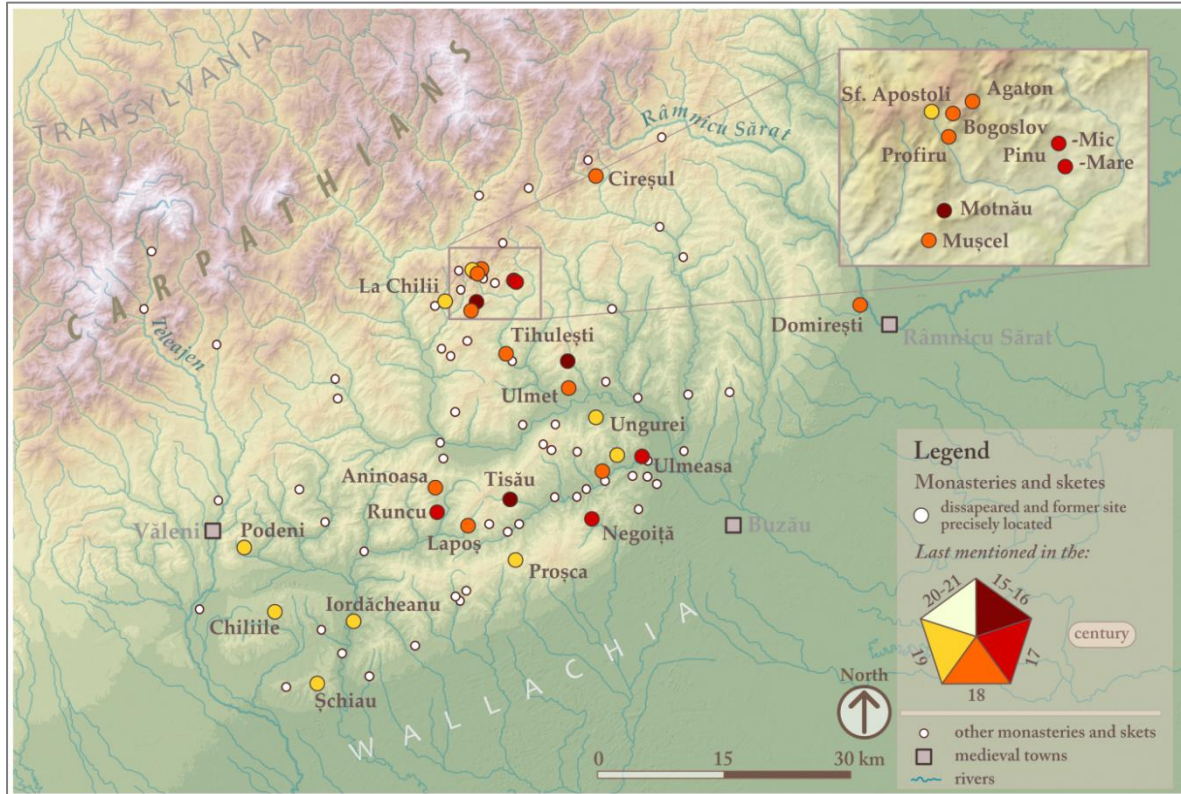


Figure 5. Map of the disappeared monasteries and sketes, but identified on the field

### The social status of the founders

In mediaeval times, the area between Teleajen and Râmnicu Sărat rivers was part of Saac, Buzău and Râmnicu Sărat counties, located at the north-eastern edge of Wallachia. Some historians and geographers consider that this area has had a particular identity throughout the Middle Ages [30] [31], which resulted especially from the rare contact between the boyars from Buzău and Râmnicu Sărat, and the princely authority [32]. Until the eighteenth century, there was a series of extremely influent boyar families, such as those of Vlaicu clucer, Mihalcea Căndescu, Neagu Bragă and those of other high and mighty boyars attested in historical documents [33], whose vast lands on the valleys of Buzău and Nișcov are attested starting with the fifteenth century, later than other regions from Wallachia. Therefore, as other researchers have shown [32], in the background of the influent boyars until the fifteenth century, the princely authority in this area has been almost non-existent. The implication of the boyars in the fight for the princely authority has been developing gradually and it culminated in the first half of the sixteenth century with the enthronement of Vlad Vintilă, boyar from Buzău [34].

A bird's eye view of the monastic establishments classified according to the social status of the founders confirms to us the power, especially the financial one, of the local boyars. This was the more significant as to the monasteries and sketes located with certainty (and thus represented on the map) there can be added at least other four monasteries founded undoubtedly by boyars, not precisely located, but attested all in the sixteenth century, and considered to have existed immediately to the north of Buzău valley in the sector Cislău – Berca [10]. Nevertheless, we can notice that they are only concentrated on the valleys of Buzău and Nișcov, while to the north they are almost absent (figure 6). Even the only boyar foundation from this area, Găvanele monastery, would only be their secondary foundation, built on the spot of an older skete, of a hermitage origin [12].

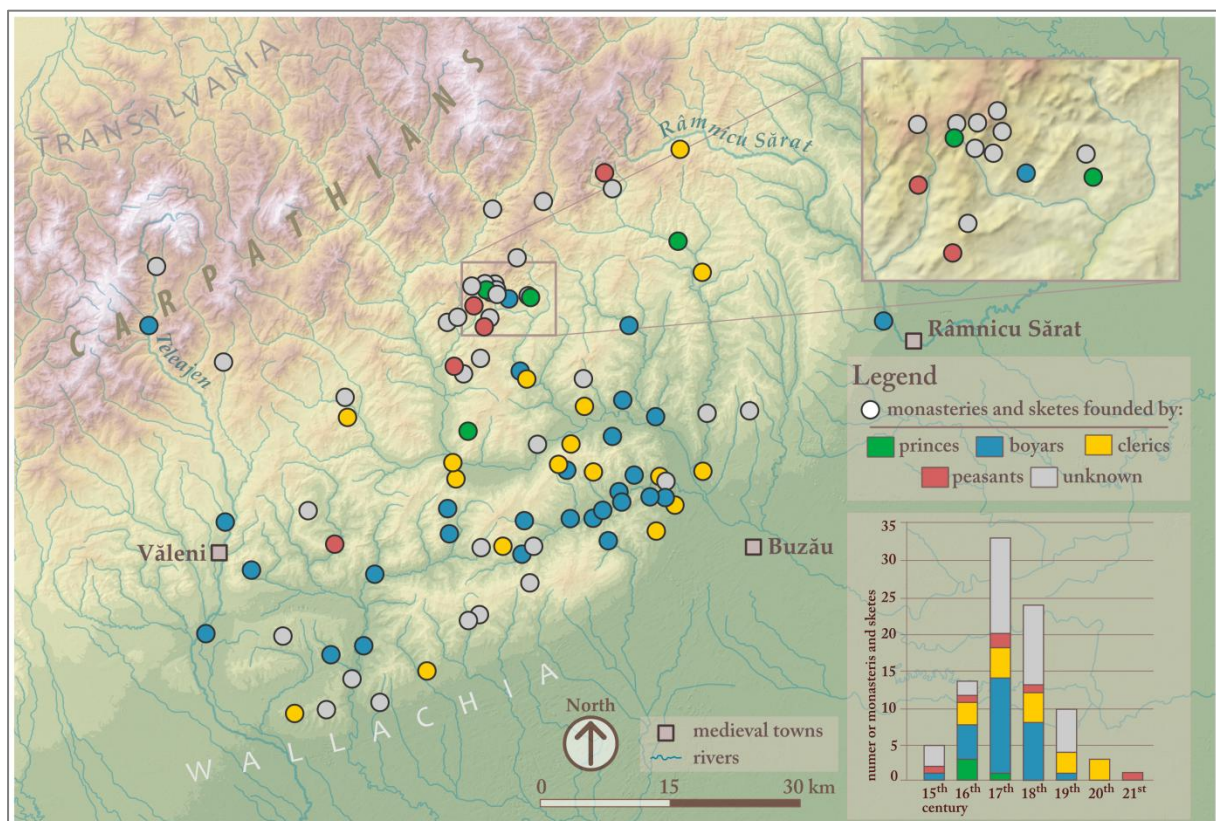


Figure 6. Map of the monasteries and sketes classified according to the social status of the founders

We believe that this irregular distribution of the boyar foundations, only in the southern half of the Buzău region shows, in fact, the extension of their ownership, where their infiltration among the village communities took place earlier and in a more significant way. Their number might be even bigger here, as we have information of only three princely foundations built before the sixteenth century – Sfântu Gheorghe, Menedic and Cârnău monasteries. Regarding the founder of the former one, there is a dissent among researchers between Mihnea Turcitul [10] and Mihai Viteazul [19] [12],



but in the case of Cârnu monastery, at the end of the sixteenth century, it has ended under the possession of a boyar family.

The circumstances change starting with the seventeenth century, when the majority of the boyar monasteries attested in the previous centuries vanishes from documents, and Matei Basarab makes the symbolic gesture of reconstructing Pinu monastery, by which he actually transferred all the little sketes under the princely authority.

To see the importance of boyar foundations from another perspective, we can note that their monasteries and sketes were, together with the clerics', the only ones who bore the name of their founders (figure 7). Apostolache, Barbu, Negoia and the less known monasteries of Radu Postelnic and Iordăchianu, are all named after the boyars who founded them, though the documents suggest that these names weren't used until the death of the founders. For example, the Barbu monastery is first attested as "the monastery of Barbu the chancellor" [35]. Not surprisingly, some of the powerful boyar foundations, by remaining in the care of later generations and with the help of the Buzău Diocese, are still functional today.

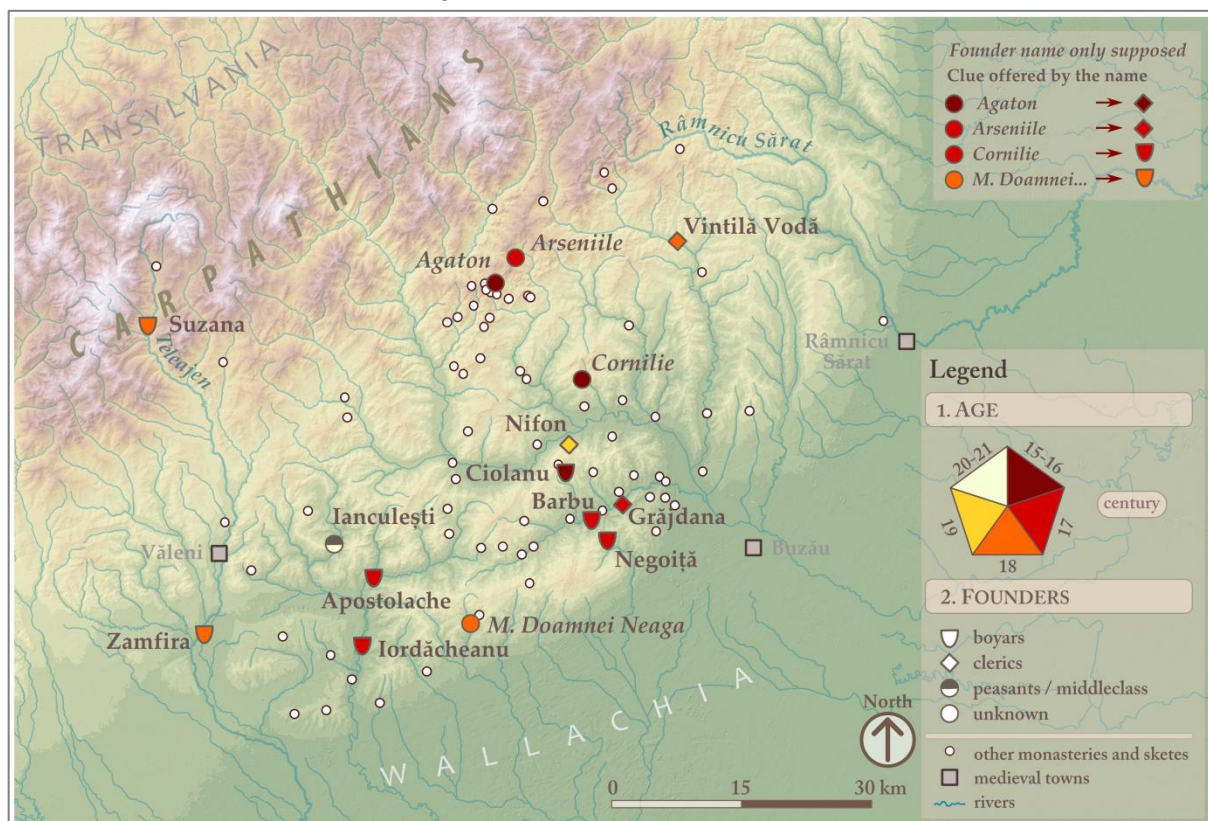


Figure 7. Map of the monasteries and sketes which bore the name of their founders

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have proposed an alternate approach for analysing the monasteries and sketes in the southern Curvature Carpathians in relation to the social status of their founders. For such an historical and geographical analysis it is necessary to have a wide range of data sources and methodologies, including archives, old inscriptions, toponyms as well as a good knowledge of the study area. Our analysis highlighted the power of the information contained in historical data when they are stored and analysed using a Geographic Information System.

Such an approach has, like all of those in historical geography, has methodological limitations. First, the data collection is based on information from historical documents which exist only for a limited number of monasteries and sketes. Even in those available, geographical descriptions or toponyms are not always present. As a result, of the one hundred monasteries and sketes attested, only forty-eight could be identified on the field and used in the analysis.

Nevertheless, the results obtained allowed us to better understand the role of the social status founders in the apparition and development of their foundations. It becomes more evident that monasticism in the Buzău region appeared in the areas that were previously inhabited by monks who practiced hesychasm. Yet, this type of monastic life was already very limited in the sixteenth century, when by a mixture of factors, especially the involvement of boyars and the princes, coenobitic monasticism was wide-spread. Up to the eighteenth century, the boyar foundations dominated the south of the Buzău region due to their older possessions in the area, while the north inherited the rock-hewn churches and still functioned as a magnet for hesychasm loving monks.

Ultimately, the social instability of the nineteenth century and the Secularization of 1863 led to the disappearance or dissolution of almost all of the monasteries and sketes. While the tradition of the hermits from Ivănețu Massif became famous later and their rock-hewn churches are now seen as having formed a small Mount Athos, the boyar foundations from Nișcov valley have disappeared almost entirely, not only physically, but also from local conscience, and no-one ever mentions that this area was an important mediaeval monastic center.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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